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Welcome speech on the occasion of the opening of the Conference on the European Schools

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Opening of the Conference on the European Schools

Noordwijk, the Netherlands, 15-16 May 2006

Geachte Minister van der Hoeven,

Dear Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be here today for the opening of this Conference on the European Schools in Noordwijk.

The decision to call this Conference was made last October, when the Dutch authorities began chairing the Board of Governors, and, in my view, there is no better place than the Netherlands for it to take place as the Dutch tradition and its long history of freedom of thinking and tolerance can certainly inspire us all during the conference.

The Dutch have always paid specific attention to children and their education. In his book "The Dutch culture during the golden age", Simon Schama, the British historian of Dutch origin describes how, during the 17th century, visitors from other countries were impressed by the tenderness devoted to the children. The way children were treated was characterised by (I quote):

"A balance between education and play, learning and leisure, obedience and freedom, safety and autonomy".

Furthermore, children were prepared to become knowledgeable citizens and their activities were often linked to civic duties.

I believe such principles remain pillars of good education even nowadays.

When Minister van der Hoeven and I met, we had an open discussion about the European School System, and we both felt committed to the fundamental values it holds and to the high quality of the education it provides.

But we both also recognised that the System, in its current format, fails to respond to the needs and evolution of the needs, particularly in view of the enlargement of the European Union as well as of the accrued number of EU Agencies across Member States.

In some of the major sites the overpopulation is already a very urgent problem: there are currently more than 20.000 pupils in all of the European Schools combined. These numbers will increase as colleagues continue to arrive from the "new" Member States. This implies not only an increased number of potential pupils but also an increase in language sections.

Overall, this puts higher demands on the system as a whole to provide mother-tongue education in languages not previously taught. All parents know the importance of keeping the mother tongue alive, not only for keeping links with the home country, but also from a cultural identity point of view.

It is also important to encourage interaction with local people. From the point of view of the EU Institutions, contacts with the local authorities need to be properly addressed, as they are becoming increasingly difficult.

In some places the obligation to provide the necessary infrastructures for our Schools is felt as an increasing burden. The major site of Brussels is an example, as we are still urgently awaiting proposals from the Belgian authorities on the opening of a transitional School site to deal with the problem of overcrowding.

The question of access of local children to our Schools and kindergartens is also creating tensions. We have at this moment 5.933 local children in the European Schools.

Therefore, the discussion about the future of the system needs to also reflect on the principles and financing of admitting local children to the European Schools. The local authorities are understandably more interested in actively participating in the system if they can identify advantages for their nationals.

The question of financing and management in light of the changes in financial management and audit in the Commission itself is becoming more and more acute.

I also believe that the reform will not be complete without addressing the matter of ensuring a fair distribution of the burden to provide teachers among Member States.

In July 2004 the Commission published a Communication on the "Options for developing the European School System", and launched a wide debate. The number and the content of the feedback we got from all stakeholders show the importance given to an improved running of the System, and the urgency to reform it in order to ensure better governance.

Indeed we all know, and for many of us by personal experience, that access to high quality education is a major concern for all parents, and that transmission of mother tongue language and culture is crucial for expatriated families.

We also see that the recruitment of qualified staff is difficult in the new EU Agencies located in an increasing number of Member States where no appropriate schooling can be offered to the children of the staff.

Several constructive ideas are put forward in the preparatory information that you have received. For example, I agree with Minister van der Hoeven that the so-called "School type II" is worth serious consideration, as it could be the way forward in solving some of our current issues with the increasing number of Agencies across Europe.

That this Conference has been instigated is already a strong signal: it shows that there is a political will both to address the issue of the future of the European School System and to act in order to allow it to pursue its core "raison d'être" as stated in the Convention: the education of the children of the staff of the European Institutions, wherever they are.

The fact is, the European School System is close to reaching its limits and in the medium term it is going to collapse if no action is taken.

We can already see some alarming signs: decisions are getting more and more difficult to be taken, sometimes they seem to result more from the sum of short-term national interests than from a real consideration of long-term common interest in the good functioning of the System.

I agree with Minister van der Hoeven that the idea, discussed in the preparatory working group, of a "tightened management board" seems appealing in terms of improved governance. I hope that you will elaborate on this basis.

The purpose of this Conference is to give vision and political impetus to this issue and to help define directions and options which should be proposed for decision at the highest political level. That is the reason why, in the letter Minister van der Hoeven and I sent last November to our Ministerial colleagues in all 25 Member States, we asked them to nominate representatives with the appropriate authority to represent the views of their government.

In conclusion, I would ask you to find answers to the following questions.

First – how can the increased diversity of languages be managed inside the Schools?

Second – how should we regulate the relationships with the local population and local authorities, including the issue of admitting local children?

Third – how can we ensure a fair distribution of the financial burden underlying our educational institutions? Here the role of the EU budget needs to be addressed as well as the share of local financing and how to balance the financial burden of Member states who detach teachers from their national systems.

Fourth – with a starting point of good governance: how can we ensure that the European Schools are all managed and audited according to the best modern standards?

I know that we can fully rely on your distinguished competences. There is in this room high-level knowledge and expertise in the area of education and European schooling.

There must also be the courage. I therefore urge you all to analyse, without reservation, the strong and weak points of the European Schools System in order to define a new way to move ahead.

Please address the different options set out by the High Level Group with an open mind, without fearing that too much change could denature the European Schools System. I share many of the ideas expressed in these options. Only the ability to make the necessary changes will ensure the future success of the System.

I would like to thank again Minister van der Hoeven and her collaborators for all their efforts, which have made this meeting possible.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am confident that you will make a crucial contribution to the process of reforming the European School System and in doing so you will serve the best interests of the children and of the European Institutions.

You can rely on my full political commitment in this process.

I wish you a very successful Conference.

Dank U voor Uw aandacht.